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A SKETCH OF  
John F. Hagen  
HERO

OF THE



Schuylkill Tragedy  
AND  
RESCUER OF EIGHT LIVES.

By MRS. VIRGINIA BARNHURST.

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M. v. g. Jan. 9-17.

## A SKETCH OF JOHN F. HAGEN.

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John Francis Hagen, the subject of this little book, is no doubt already well known to many of its readers. Some, who will read it, have known him up through his childhood, while, as a poor unimportant boy he earned a meagre livelihood upon the banks of the Schuylkill River, and there are those, who have only known this young man, who has so suddenly been brought into public notice, from that time, when on the third day of February, 1884, he became the hero of this same Schuylkill River, by risking his own life to save the lives of others.

Everybody does not possess courage and presence of mind in moments of sudden danger. When a person who does possess these qualities exercises them in the saving of human life, he is sure to call forth for himself the admiration, esteem and sympathy of the eye witnesses of such a scene as that which occurred upon that winter Sunday upon the ice-covered Schuylkill—a scene which so thrilled the hearts of the lookers-on, and which has for the last two or three weeks made so conspicuous the poor, obscure youth, and rendered him a hero—the subject of fireside conversation and praise,—of newspaper articles innumerable, and the recipient of favors of a more practical and tangible character.

Our Hero is American born but of Old Country parentage, and much credit is he, to the race and blood from which he springs; proving as he has done, that he has in his character a large amount of that Irish pluck and grit, which at the present time is giving John Bull so much trouble, by everlastingly shaking the Shamrock of St. Patrick into the face of the British Lion. That Irish pluck and grit which holds such undying faith in an Ireland free,—in a grand future for the land of Emmett, of O'Connell, of Parnell, of the Emerald Isle.



Hagen was born at the southwest corner of Twenty-fourth and Green Streets, at Old Fairmount, known as a part of the old district of Spring Garden and now called the Fifteenth Ward. He will be twenty-three years old the third day of the coming August, is of dark complexion, and in stature, rather under the medium height. He is quite light in build, and evidently possesses more of nervous than of muscular strength, that kind of strength which in the absence of all thought of self, in moments where it is suddenly called upon in great danger, is often more reliable and effectual than the mere brawny muscle of the pugilist.

The young man, in his own words, frankly owns to having been a "wild boy." Having lost his parents when very young, and having been obliged to pretty much shift for himself, he seems to have taken to that kind of Arab life, which however disastrous it may prove to all school or book culture, after all, certainly supplies in itself a useful compensation in the self-reliance and independence of character which it is sure to develop. He acknowledges that as a boy he had some opportunities offered him for going to school, but that he did not then feel the need of an education as he should have done, and as he does now. His love and habits of outside life made the inside of the school-room irksome to him; and he is very candid in saying that when sent to school, he was much given to that common weakness of boys, that of playing "hooky." Yet, whatever may have been the faults of the boy, he has always been known as honest, and ever willing to turn a hand to earn a penny. Honesty and the will to do are good qualities, upon which to form a foundation for the character and life of an individual. The boy in emerging into the youth gradually became more settled in his habits, and for some time back he has been steadily endeavoring to make his way as man, with the same industry, honesty and effort that he has done as boy. Since the establishment of the Fairmount Bath Houses, he has been employed in them, in the responsible position of charge of the clothes closets. During the winter he would take up with such desultory occupation as might present itself, and such as falls to the lot of those, who, while they have no regular vocation by which to make a living, must nevertheless live. In fact, as boy, youth, or man, he has never been accused of idleness, and besides, he has given evidence of thrift, and is moreover



inclined to be provident, as he has followed the rule of in the summer months, laying up enough to ensure the paying of his board through the winter term, when the chances were against his having steady employment. He is known to be thoroughly temperate in his habits, even to abstemiousness, indulging in the use neither of tobacco nor any kind of intoxicating stimulants. He is strictly attentive to his religious duties, and is a firm believer in the faith of his forefathers. That he has been brave and plucky from his boyhood up, in making an honest living, those can testify who have always known him; that now in early manhood, he has shown himself unselfish and reliable in moments of great peril, where the exercise of these qualities are needed, can be proved, in the words of the hundreds, who were present at the occurrence of the event that makes him the subject of the little sketch which we present to the notice of the reader.

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## A BEAUTIFUL SUNDAY.

The Sunday of February 3d, was an unusually fine day for the season. It was one of those bright days dealt out so very sparingly by the Weather Clerk during the winter term—one of those days so sure of being appreciated more especially if it happens to be a Sunday—that day of all the week, which to the masses of the people is the only day for outside life and healthy recreation. This Sunday, was one of those Sundays, which are so anxiously prognosticated the night before, in the moon-lit or starry sky, and which, when it makes its appearance in a flood of sunlight, accompanied by a very considerate upward tendency of the mercury, is hailed as a godsend.

The Schuylkill River, which is always beautiful, looked beautiful indeed, as it lay peacefully in the sunshine in its thick covering of ice. From bridge to bridge—the Girard and Callowhill, with the exception of the immediate neighborhood of the dam, all day long, the throng of pedestrians coursed up and down, across and back, with as much confidence as if this impromptu promenade, gotten up by Old King Winter, were as reliably safe as the Hamilton Street Telford pavement.

The peanut venders did a thrifty business that might have thrown into shade the whole week's receipts. Skaters pirouetted on their skates, here and there in every direction. Lovers in pairs, oblivious of all else but themselves, in true lover-style, with heads bobbed together, whispered sweet things to each other. The lonely old bachelor smoked his cigar; staid married folks with their families, walked in dignified silence and uninterrupted, except, when, in steering too near some inviting looking peanut establishment, "papa" was reminded by the junior members of the party that the invigorating air was particularly given to working up an appetite for peanuts and candy. The whole river, in fact, looked as though a gala day had broken loose upon it. The sunshine streamed down so ardently that cloaks and overcoats became at a discount.

It is said that treachery is sure to assume a smooth and innocent face. As fair and reliable as the Schuylkill looked, we did not feel so confident as did some others. Under the Girard Ave. Bridge the ice had lost its credit, and alarm flags warned the pedestrians that "thus far and no farther" should they go, was the life-saving law at that point. Some dozen yards from this guarded weakness, we heard a sharp cracking of the ice, and as we had two or three sleds of human freight in trust, we concluded that *terra firma* was a much to be preferred place. A repetition of the ominous warning settled our conclusions, and with a feeling of genuine relief, we found ourselves on land once more. Numbers had thinned off on the river, and groups still loitered along the shore. Suddenly upon the scene, fell a kind of a reacting or counter movement, then, a rush as of a panic, and in less time than it takes to tell it, the river was cleared, and the crowd surged down the shore toward the Callowhill Street Bridge, from which direction, the cries of distress told that an accident had occurred. Both decks of the bridge and the shores were lined with people, while beneath it, on the river, a scene fell on the eye which it would be difficult for those who saw it to forget. The ice had broken in for about the space of twelve feet, and in this watery grave a mass of human beings were struggling for life. The centre figure of the scene, was that of a man, who, with supernatural efforts, first with one hand and then with the other, to the right and to the left, threw

one after the other, this human mass, up on to the ice. The man, to the eye, seemed to literally stand upon the treacherous waves beneath him. The crowd shouted and cheered—the excitement growing greater and greater as one after another the drowning boys were brought by the effort of that single man up out from the yawning death-trap. It seems, that before the accident, an immense sled had been the point of attention, to the pleasure-seekers who happened in that direction. This sled, had been going backwards and forwards, from shore to shore, laden with a cargo of boys of from eight to twelve years of age. On this last trip, it had unluckily broken through, in a part of the ice, which had become rotten, and the back part of it, had gone down, submerging its human freight, with the exception of those, who were clinging on at the sides, and who had gotten off, with only a slight wetting, and a good fright. Hagen, the conductor of the sled, was at the back of it and went down with it. As the sled was drawn out, he rose to the surface, with a boy gripping him around the neck, and one clutching him at each arm. As Hagen himself, gives it, the boy, John Daily, had his arm so tightly clasped around his, Hagen's throat, that the latter was losing consciousness, just as Mr. Charles Eble, of 531 North Twenty-fourth Street, pulling the child from his neck and releasing him from the hold of the other two boys, helped Hagen himself out on to the ice. We must give a few words here to the credit of this gentleman. Mr. Eble is a barber at the number just mentioned; is in delicate health, and is not a swimmer. On this day, being so near the accident, he risked his own life by keeping to his post, on a cake of the cracked, and separating ice on the edge of the aperture, and besides saving a small boy, who came up, near the edge on which he stood, rendered timely aid to those thrown up by Hagen on the ice.

As soon as Hagen had, in reaching the ice, become fully conscious of the situation, he had sprang into the death hole, among the helpless children, and had began the work of saving them as we have already described it. Three times, he made the plunge, the last time, at the sight of a hat pointed out to him, and which he secured, and which was afterwards found to be the one belonging to a missing boy named James Donalan.

## THE DROWNED BOY.

The hat taken by Hagen from the water, was retained by him for identification. It had been pretty generally concluded, that all who had gone down on the ill-fated sled, had been saved. So it was not considered expedient to make any search for the owner, as it seemed quite probable that one of the saved boys, in his haste, had scampered off home, and left his hat behind; too glad to get away to think of much else. Some time after the accident, a man coming up, recognized the hat as that of his son James, a boy between ten and eleven years old. Mr. Donalan, the father, stated, that the boy had gone out during the afternoon, and that as it grew late, and the child did not return, he had become uneasy about him, and that in the meanwhile, hearing of the accident, he had hastened to the spot where it had occurred, with the worst fears of what the result of the search might be. The truth of the matter was but too evident, to the poor father, and to those present. The Schuylkill Harbor Police Boat, the Samuel G. King, coming up at the time, after some little delay, under the orders of Mr. William Francis, the lieutenant, the work of breaking the ice and grappling for the body was begun, although continued for some time without success.

It seemed very probable that the unfortunate boy had been swept under the ice and drowned. The search was kept up until after eleven o'clock the same night, without success. At about 11.30, the body was taken, some forty feet from the spot where the accident had occurred. With very little doubt, it had been one of the first to slip from the sled, while the latter was going down, and probably had gotten under the sled, and instead of rising, when the sled was pulled out, had floated off under the ice. The chances being, that the child was suffocated too soon, to either suffer, or to be conscious of what had happened to him. The father, who had remained all during the search, accompanied the body home, where on the following morning, an inquest was held by Deputy Coroner Ashbridge.

## THE FUNERAL

Of the drowned boy, took place, Wednesday, February 6th, at two o'clock, from the residence of his parents, No. 2340 Callowhill Street. Services were held at St. Francis Church, Twenty-fifth, above Hamilton Street, the Angel Sodality a Sunday School Society attending in a body. The interment took place in Old Cathedral Cemetery.

## THE SAVED BOYS.

In regard to the number of boys saved by Hagen from a watery grave, there have been some conflicting statements. It seems, that some of them as soon as they found themselves safely out of the water, fully recognized that home was about the best place for them, and without ceremony, made for that direction. The prompt action of Hagen, left them so little time in the water, that they were fully capable of helping themselves, and were not either stunned or helpless, as they might have been, if they had been obliged to wait for help from those around, who were so good and brave, at looking on. As to Hagen himself, he says, that he took no count of how many he was saving. He had but the one thought, and that was *to save*. The crowd was too much excited, to indulge in examples in addition, but as a looker on, we are sure that no less, than eight lives, were saved, and perhaps, more might be added to the list. As the credit of eight in all, saved by his hand has been awarded to him, we give that as the number here. We did not, of course, know the boys, as we saw them, one after another, brought up out of the water, but we give the names here as we got them from, what we take our chances, as being reliable: Charles Shields, No. 2301 Callowhill Street; James Grant, Callowhill, above Twenty-third; William Smith, Twenty-sixth and Callowhill; James Clarke, James Delaney, Eleventh and Federal Streets; Joseph Carr, Callowhill, above Twenty-third; David Revels, Callowhill Street. Besides these, we were given the names of Joseph Henry and Charles Thomas, of Brown Street. All of the boys are under twelve years of age, and there seems to be very little room for doubting, that the number of the saved boys amounts to from twelve to fifteen.

## THE DONALANS

Are a very respectable and well-known family in the locality in which they live. The father of the unfortunate boy, Mr. James Donalan, is a boss carder in Wood's mill, Twenty-second and Spring Garden. The family consisted of eight children, six girls and two boys, the elder of the two, being the one drowned. The parents do not appear in any way to reflect upon Hagen, as at all to blame for their sad loss, or to hold him in the least responsible for it. The mother says, that she knows that he would have saved her boy had he been able to do so, and that he saved the lives of other boys, whose lives were as dear to their mothers, as was the life of her boy dear to her. She gave us quite an interesting little account, of how he came to go to the river that unlucky day. In the morning, she had told him that it being so warm, the ice might break, and that he must not go on it. He rather argued the case with her, saying, that there would be fun, and he wanted to go. He had been to Sunday-school, and about three o'clock, he came in, and again, she told him that he must not go. To show how people go to their fate, he went out, and a neighbor afterwards told the mother, that the little fellow, stood before his own door, evidently undecided, whether to go or not. A party of small boys stood on the corner, as it seemed, waiting for him. Seeing these, he yielded to the temptation, and joining them, the whole party disappeared. He was seen after that about four o'clock, and had probably not yet been on the sled at that time.

The sensible manner in which the parents look upon the matter, in throwing the blame nowhere, but in considering it as something that was to be, is very different from the unjust way that some have in treating matters in life. For example, we have been told, that the father of one of the boys, when his son made his appearance at home, dripping wet, and shivering, gave him a right sound flogging, and moreover told him, that he would do the same by John Hagen, if he could only lay his hands on him. We cannot vouch for the truth of this story, and we do hope that it is false. Any parent who could receive a child, who had just been rescued from a terrible death, in such a brutal manner, no matter what the fault, and where it had been, is unworthy of the commonest respect.

One would judge that in the thought that the life of his child had been saved, there could have been no room in his heart for blaming any one or anything. It is very strange of what different material the moral natures of people are made.

There does seem to be those who show themselves inclined to deny to Hagen any praise in this matter. He having had the sled, he by them is evidently looked upon as having been the indirect cause of the accident. We ourselves came in contact with one of this stripe. While gathering up information upon the subject, we asked a father if his son was among those saved by Hagen. He gruffly replied: "Humph! He pulled him out." Now we did not stop to ask this loving father what he expected Hagen to do under the circumstances; nor could we understand, whether he meant to find fault with the young man's manner of saving drowning boys, or whether he was grumbling with him because he did not let his boy drown. One thing certain, Hagen did not stop to put on gloves, and as to the manner of going about the business, he didn't "pull them out;" he simply, unceremoniously *threw* them out—not even by retail, but by the wholesale. The one thing we regret is, that instead of this man's boy, Hagen had not saved poor little Jimmy Donalan, whose parents, even over their boy in his coffin, had not one word of blame against Hagen. Then the kind father might have had some cause for grumbling.

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## THE SLED

which made such a feature in the accident, and which takes an important place as one of the principal factors in it, was of such unusual dimensions as to be one of the most conspicuous objects on the ice. Being so much in size above the other sleds, and in appearance, so different from the small fry around, it took a gigantic place in the eyes of those watching that winter's day ice carnival. And when it slipped over the glassy surface, freighted to completion with its wild, rosy, boyish troop, shouting and laughing, in such an abandon of joy and merriment, as only childhood is capable of, no wonder, that the scene so suddenly changed by the deceitful ice, should have turned everything, into a pell-mell of terror and alarm, and one which no pen could find words to describe.



Perhaps, here, Hagen's own story, as he told it to us, might be of some interest to the reader, although it may repeat some of the matter already given.

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## HAGEN'S STORY.

"It being winter, I had a good deal of time on hand, so, as there was so much snow, I took the notion to make a good sled. I intended it more particularly, for the benefit of the little daughter of Mrs. Moane. I boarded with Mrs. Moane, and I knew that Mamie and her little friends, liked very much to sled. I took a fancy to make a real large sled, one that would hold several children at a time. The sled was not entirely my own. Mrs. Moane found the rope, which cost twenty cents, and the runners which cost twenty-five cents. It was made of an old door fastened to a pair of barrel skids, the runners being six inches high and four inches thick. It was pushed by a big hook and there was a rope to pull it. I used to haul it up and down the river, six or eight at a time sometimes on the sled. I would go under the bridge often as far as the drove yard. I would push it mostly by the hook. Sunday morning, I think it was about nine o'clock when I first started out with it. I did not have but two or three boys on at this time, but I promised that I would take little Mamie and her friends in the afternoon, but I did not go to the place where I told them I would, meet them because I had heard that the ice was weak there. During the afternoon I found that under the bridge, on the north side, was a good place on the ice that the sun did not strike. By this time, there were a great many boys on the river, and they all wanted to get on the sled. I piled on to it, as many as it would hold, and pushed them over to the other side. After a while, so many wanted to get on, that I was obliged to divide them up, and let each lot take its turn. The way I did, I would take so many over, then, they would get off, and let the lot waiting there, get on, and those who got off, would take hold of the rope, while I pushed with the hook. It was getting late in the afternoon, I had been pushing nearly all day, and I felt real tired. I told the boys that I wanted to go home and that I would not cross again. They begged so hard for another ride that I told them I would give

them one more, but that would be the last. I loaded for the last time, then I got on myself, on the back of the sled, and on the west side. When we got about forty feet from the shore, the ice began to crack, and into the water we all went. I was at the right side of the sled, and near Daily, who called out "Sar" (the boys called me "Sardine"), and with that he clasped his arms so tightly around my neck, that I became unconscious, and we both would have been drowned had not Mr. Eble, who was standing on the edge of the ice, pulled Daily from my neck. I can hardly tell how I got out, but they say that Charley Eble, after taking Daily off my neck, and the two boys that had hold of my arms, had been pulled off by him, pulled me out. I know that as soon as I was on the ice. I saw just how it was. I jumped in and caught the boys as fast as I could and threw them up on the ice. I was too excited I think to notice much. I only wanted to save them all. I know Eble said to me there's the head of a boy, and I pushed aside a cake of ice, but it was only a hat. I swam about some time, but not finding anything more I thought that all were saved. So did the rest. If I had known that Jimmy Donalan was under the ice, I would have gone under to find him. I got out and took my sled and went home, but I could not rest. So I went down to the river again; but I was shivering with cold and did not remain, and I went home and went to bed. If I could only have saved the poor boy. I am so sorry I could not, but I did the best I could.

### CHANGING THE DESTINY.

A writer remarks, that the turning around the corner down one street instead of another, may change a person's whole destiny in life. True it is, that a very simple thing may change the fate of a man or woman. It was a homely affair, that clumsy sled, wrought out of an old door and pair of barrel skids, but it turned out to be a stepping stone to another life, for the poor youth, whose lines had indeed been "laid in hard places."

So much honor, praise, and attention, as have been bestowed upon him, since that thrilling and exciting event, has brought him so suddenly into notice, might turn many an older and wiser head. But so far Hagen, has acquitted himself modestly and bears his

honors in a manner to do him credit. He says that he intends to do his best, to show his appreciation of the opportunities which have been given him, for paving his way to success in life. From what we have seen, we have no doubt but he will prove himself in every way, worthy of all the reward awarded to him.

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## THE AGREEMENT.

An agreement was entered into February 14th, by which John F. Hagen is to be placed in the Glenwood Institute. Hagen being of age, signed the articles himself, the other parties thereto being Lincoln H. Passmore, George W. Johnson, and Louis N. Mergar-gee. The agreement recited the fact, that in recognition of Hagen's conduct in saving eight children from drowning, certain contributions have been made to the three parties of the second part, who reserved the right to use the money so contributed, for his education. It also provides that Hagen shall have the privilege of disposing of any balance of the sum, by will, as he may see fit. The entire contribution is said to amount to over \$900.

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## A GOLD MEDAL FOR BRAVERY.

for saving human life has been awarded to John F. Hagen. The face of the medal represents the Schuylkill River, with the Callow-hill Street bridge in the distance. The water is covered with a sheet of ice, which has broken, and eight boys are seen in the water struggling to the edges. Hagen is seen jumping into the opening, and one small boy is noticed sinking. On the reverse of the medal is the inscription: "Presented to John F. Hagen in recognition of his self-sacrificing bravery, in preventing eight boys from being drowned in the River Schuylkill, Philadelphia, February 3d, 1884."

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## LIVES PREVIOUSLY SAVED.

When the medal was awarded for his bravery in rescuing eight boys from being drowned in the Schuylkill River, it probably was not known, that another medal, might also have been awarded, for the lives heretofore saved, by the recipient, upon this same river. From what we have lately gleaned, while hunting for the truth for

this little sketch, we find that it would be impossible to get a correct statement, of the number of lives saved by Hagen. His life has been so much spent upon the Schuylkill River, that he seems in a manner identified with it. An elderly man, one Thomas Conner, a gardener by profession, living on Carlton Street near Twenty-fourth, whose life was saved by Hagen, tells that he has known him from a baby in his mother's arms. He says that he has always shown great presence of mind in moments of danger to others. Conner's story in relation to himself is, that one day seeing one of his little grandchildren on the ice, and fearing for it, he was crossing in the direction of the child when he fell through the ice, and not being able to swim would have drowned, had not Hagen, who had happened to see the accident, come to his rescue. The latter, simply took the coat from his back, and retaining one part of it in his hand, threw it so that Conner could clutch the other part, and then drew him up to the edge and thus saved him from drowning. Conner cited two or three other cases for which we have no room here, but we think he could talk of, and praise the savior of his life as long as any one would sit and listen to him. We certainly found him to possess that one noble quality not always possessed, that of gratitude. We have since been told that two boys not long since were saved, from being drowned, also a man who, with the intention of committing suicide, had jumped into the river near the Market Street bridge was rescued by him.

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### WHY NOT?

It has been suggested by an old tax-payer of the Fifteenth Ward that a Swimming School be instituted near the spot where the accident took place, in order that boys who have a particular taste for swimming, and the water, may be educated in such a manner, as to fit them for the Life-Saving Service, and for Coast Guards. The idea is respectfully offered to the attention of our newly-elected Mayor, William B. Smith, who, it is said, is a man ready to listen to new ideas.

Hoping that this little book may please those who read it, I remain to you, the readers, yours respectfully,

THE AUTHOR.

We give here a letter received from the Principal of Glenwood Institute, which may be of interest to our readers.

GLENWOOD INSTITUTE, MATAWAN, N. J., March 8, 1884.

*Mrs. Virginia Barnhurst :—*

It gives me great pleasure to say a few words concerning one whom you have seen fit to honor with special, but appropriate mention. He has been a member of my school for three weeks, and if all my pupils were as painstaking and devoted as he, my school would be a perfect Elysium, for a teacher. He is making rapid progress, and through his earnest efforts he will not be long in coming to the front. His habits are of the very best, and, as I wrote to Mr. Passmore, it would be difficult to find, by searching from any number of young men, brought up as he has been, one who has more substantial qualities of mind and character than has John Hagen. The money contributed to the fund in his favor could not have fallen into more worthy hands, and I deem it a privilege to be allowed to testify concerning him, although the time of acquaintance has, it is true, been brief. The honors which, one may say, have been crowded upon him, have not produced, as would have been in most cases, an unfavorable reaction, but a characteristic modesty and an absence of desire to have self foremost seem to prevail. I have sent an account of his heroic act to the American Minister at Paris, in hopes that the Society at Paris, which, I am told, recognizes similar acts sometimes in a special way, may at least have the knowledge of the remarkable deed laid before them. Hoping that your effort in giving the account of this singularly heroic act to the world, and in embalming its memories, as it were, in a more substantial way than has yet appeared, may enkindle a desire in the hearts of many of the young, to manifest even in the common walks of life, heroic features of character.

I am very truly yours,      CHARLES JACOBUS, Prin.

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